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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 001509

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TAGS: [KISL](#) [SCUL](#) [KPAO](#) [PREL](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: BURMA'S MUSLIM LEADERS, FOREIGN DIPLOMATS FETED
FOR RAMADAN

REF: A. STATE 302772

[1](#)B. RANGOON 1479

[1](#)C. RANGOON 1361

Classified By: COM Carmen Martinez for Reasons 1.5 (B,D)

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Two Iftaar dinners hosted recently by the Embassy community made great strides in improving already good relations with the Burmese and Diplomatic Muslim communities. There were good exchanges on religious diversity, the role of Islam in the United States, religious tensions in Burma, and the importance of multilateral cooperation to combat terrorism. Both events will lead to several follow-on steps, which will advance Embassy political, security, and religious freedom policy objectives. End summary.

Muslim Leaders Break Bread for Iftaar

[1](#)2. (U) A November 19 Iftaar dinner hosted by Chief of Mission (COM) and Embassy staff was extremely well received by nine Burmese Muslim leaders, and their spouses, who told us they'd never before been invited by the U.S. Embassy to such an event. The attendees at the dinner included scholars, and representatives of the Muslim youth league, Burma's only Muslim newspaper, and one of the country's two primary Muslim groups -- the Islamic Religious Affairs Council. Burmese Muslims are predominately Sunni, however, the leader of the country's Shi'ite minority also attended.

[1](#)3. (U) The dinner was quite collegial, with the COM discussing the importance of religious diversity and the prominence of Islam in the United States. She also made the point that in discussions with the Burmese government on terrorism, the U.S. government was adamant that legitimate security concerns were not a pretext for further Burmese government oppression of the Muslim community.

[1](#)4. (C) On recent Buddhist-Muslim violence (ref c), the attendees said that there had been no further incidences since late October. However, they admitted, there was still some atmosphere of fear in the Muslim quarters of Rangoon. One of the Iftaar guests had to leave the dinner early because he was due for "neighborhood watch" duty -- apparently arranged with the government so any sparks can be quickly reported to a responsible military official.

[1](#)5. (C) Another leader told us that the Ministry of Religious Affairs in mid-November reminded the Muslim community again to be wary and avoid "provocative actions." Consequently, the leader said, the Muslim organizations were warning their members this Ramadan to avoid paying homage all night at the graves of their relatives. Leaders also said they had not asked for recent GOB actions to restrict Buddhist monks and monasteries (ref b). On the contrary, they feared this crackdown might provoke Buddhist resentment against Muslims.

Our Dinner with Muslim Diplomats

[1](#)6. (U) On November 15, the Air Attach also hosted an Iftaar dinner at his home for Defense Attaches from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia and their families. The guests said they enjoyed the evening and were very pleased with the fellowship that came from breaking fast together. During the evening, those present discussed issues such as the root causes of international terrorism, how to deal with terrorists, and the need for further cross-border information sharing and cooperation. In the end, all agreed that building relationships that increase our mutual understanding is a crucial first step toward working better together in the future to stop trans-national terrorism and other national security threats.

Comment: The Beginning of Beautiful Friendships

[1](#)7. (SBU) Both Embassy-hosted Iftaars were solid stepping stones to even closer relations with the Burmese and diplomatic Muslim community. The Defense Attach and other Embassy officials will continue to engage Rangoon-based diplomats from Muslim countries on security cooperation, and local religious and political issues. In addition, we are

already planning several follow-on steps for cultivating our ties to the Burmese Muslim community. Following the COM's Iftaar dinner, several of the Muslim leaders invited Embassy hosts to their headquarters to attend future Iftaar dinners. Another leader invited the Chief of Mission to visit a local madrassa that teaches about Islam in English. We also received many requests from the Burmese Muslims for more information on Muslims in the United States; requests that our Public Diplomacy section will quickly meet.

Martinez